THE ENIGMA OF MAN
PSALM #8
ROMANS 7:21-25

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I am fascinated by the fascination of the American people with the comings and goings of Howard Hughes. All things considered, it's really not very essential for my life to know Mr. Hughes' personal habits, his whereabouts, his affairs, or even whether or not his biography is authentic. In fact, I couldn't care less. And yet, it has taken a super-human effort recently not to become informed about Mr. Hughes because he's on the front page of the paper every day, his presumed biographer makes a nightly appearance in the news, and Time Magazine whose taste I usually trust donated a full cover article to him.

From all that I have reluctantly read Mr. Hughes is a grim, lonely, eccentric who wants nothing in life so much as to be left alone. Yet he is a hero - a celebrity - a household word. And the reason, I think, is that he is the embodiment - the fulfillment - the incarnation of the American Dream. He has, literally, so much money he can't spend it all. Howard Hughes, the American people seem to be saying, is what life is all about.

Abraham Heschel, famous Jewish Scholar tells a little story to illustrate how the American definition of man is cash oriented. "A baby was born in the hospital, and the father's first chance to see his firstborn child was after it was brought home and placed in the crib. His friends saw how he leaned over the crib and an expression of extreme bewilderment was in his face. Why do you look so bewildered? Impossible, he answered: how can they make such a fine crib for $29.50?" (James Angill, Put Your Arms Around the City, P 151)

I'm fascinated with our obsession with Howard Hughes and the dollar and cents definition of man.

I'm fascinated by the curious public fascination with a man by the name of Duane Thomas. Now, some of you know that name and some do not. Duane Thomas is a black man who doesn't say much to anyone, and when he does it usually sounds mean. Duane Thomas is a running back for the Dallas Cowboys, a master at his trade, some think the best in the business. But Duane Thomas doesn't sign autographs, or give interviews, or talk to reporters or sell razor blades.

He just runs the football and guards his privacy. And we're fascinated. For here is another fulfillment of the American Dream - the ultimate athlete, the strong indestructable man, who can slow our other men better than anybody else. And we just have to know what he eats for breakfast, and what he thinks about civil rights and what he does with his liesure time. Because, for many people Duane Thomas is what human life is all about.

I'm fascinated by the fascination of the American people with a man by the name of Hugh Heffner. Mr. Heffner publishes a magazine called Playboy, and writes a little adolescent philosophy on occassion and owns a black DC-9 and lives in what used to be the Palmolive building on Chicago's Michigan Avenue, from which he rarely emerges,and in which he apparently sleeps all day and stays up all night being cool and drinking Pepsi-Cola. And we're fascinated. We've got to know more about this man who is surrounded by beautiful women, good booze, fancy cars and airplanes, good food and the freedom to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants it. Because he fulfills another American dream: another definition of man - the ultimate Playboy.

"What is Man?", the Psalmist asked, and the composite answer out of contemporary American culture looks like a rich, athlete who is a swinger. And for the life of me I can think of no one who combines the three more completely - who is the American Holy Trinity incarnate - than Joe Willie Namath. Which, by the way, may be the first time Joe has ever been used as a sermon illustration.

Every age in history, every culture has had its model - its image - its definition of man. I have suggested three part model that seems to be ours. In ancient Egypt the Pharohs were portrayed as Gods and the rest of the people as ants. The Greeks saw the image as a philosopher - king - athlete. In the book entitled "Bibilical Witness and the World" the authors suggest that the Sherlock Holmes was the prototype for the Victorian age, with his cool, cool, gentlemanly logic. And as a counter proposal to my rich-athlete-swinger, the authors suggest that James Bond is really the model of manhood today: he moves easily in all levels of society, he is modern: his escapades with women are

wide-ranging but never entangling: but most of all he is efficient: against fantastic odds, he gets the job done.

Whatever it is, every age, every culture, and every individual has some definition of man: some model of what human life ought to be. And that model, that definition - in turn - influences our goals, our hopes, our dreams, and the style of life we live ourselves. "What is Man?" The only question older than that, James Angill suggests is, "What's for dinner?" And it is a question that needs to be asked over and over again -particularly in the context of religion. The goal of religion, one writer observes, is to come to grips with the meaning of life: "Who am I?" What does my life mean?", which are simply other ways of asking, "What Is Man?"

The Bible is authoritation for us, so let's apply the question and see what happens. There is, of course, no index with an entry entitled "Man". There is no neat 1 page definition. But there is a very precise doctrine of man that runs through the Bible, both Old and New Testaments: and I believe that doctrine may be reduced to three simple ideas.

One: Man is exalted: the last thing God created.

Two: Man is miserable: the worst thing God created.

Three: Man is not really man until he resolves the obvious conflict between one and two, and to do that he needs help, namely God.

Let's begin with number one: man is exalted: the best thing God created. In the Genesis story,man is the highest order of creation: the crowning glory, unlike anything else in creation, made in the very image of God. Man is given the earth as his home, and the whole natural order as his environment. Man is given dominion,that is power and authority, over the rest of creation: he becomes a partner with God in the management of the world. Man is given freedom and responsibility: man is accountable for his behavior as no other creature is! man is free to make choices in light of the categories of right and wrong.

The ancient Israelites had a hold of man's exalted status. In one of their night festivals, held out of doors, a priest would ask "What is man that thou

are mindful of him?" and a choir would answer

"a little less than God, crowned with glory and honor, given dominion over the works of thy hands:"

Man is a creature of inestimable worth in the Bible, given honor and dignity by the God who created him.

Shakespere once wrote:

"What a piece of work is man;

How noble in reason,

How infinate in faculty,

In form and moving how express and admirable,

In action how like an angel,

In apprehension how like a god"

Shakespere was being very Biblical in that, for the Bible holds up a better picture of man than any other religion, a better picture in fact than most of us can accept.

That's the first thing the Bible says about us. But it's not the whole story: not by any stretch of the imagination. As a matter of fact, after having made us feel good about ourselves the Bible turns right around and pulls the rug out and says the precise opposite. As soon as the story of creation gets to a stopping point, man begins to get out of line: Man can't seem to play by the rules: Eve eats the apple, and Adam allows himself to follow suit. Cain kills Abel his brother and it's all down hill through the town of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, Noah and the flood.

The writers of Biblical history and the prophets took a very skeptical view of man and man's ability actually to be the exalted creature God created him to be. Even the heroes in the Bible - the best men in the book - are portrayed honestly with all their faults and frailties and dishonesty and sin exposed to public view. That's really significant. The Bible isn't full of plastic saints even though Sunday School curriculum is. Rather the men of the Bible are men - good and bad: honest and dishonest. Moses after all got his

start when he murdered an Egyptian in a fit of anger. David, the king, the forerunner of the Messiah, turned a corner when he committed adultery with one of his officer's wives and then arranged for the officer to be killed. Peter, St. Peter, upon whom Christ built the Church, got angry, petulant, and when the chips were down showed himself to be not only a coward, but a liar.

The Bible deals with man bluntly at times: such as Romans 3 - all men have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. St. Paul struggled with that one - that ancient paradox of man's dignity and worth and yet his obvious sinfulness. And in a confessional mood poured out the agony of his own soul I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

The Bible finally portrays man as a creature so terribly wrong - headed: so disobedient and self centered, that God's own son, at the hands of man, ends up stretched out on a cross.

The first two things the Bible says about us then are opposites: we are good and not so good: we are made in God's image, but capable of indescribable evil. The two do not negate each other: rather in the Bible they are held in tension: both are true: both accurately describe us.

Our problem, I believe, is that we don't take either one of them very seriously. We don't, I would propose, think highly enough of ourselves, or badly enough of ourselves. And we must learn to do both - at the same time.

First, we have real difficulty thinking highly enough of ourselves - and, of course, of others. The two go together.

We know that there is nothing so psychologically destructive as the lack of self esteem; feeling of worthlessness and inadequacy. We know that human love is not possible until we learn something about loving ourselves. And in the realm of inter-personal relationships I think all of us know what it feels like to be regarded as an object, a thing, a tool, and not a person of dignity and worth.

It's no accident that those forms of religion that focus entirely on man's

sin, that beat the believer down with a load of guilt too heavy to bear, are just those forms that are least interested in helping and serving others out in society. The two go together: you can't feel loveuntil you feel loved: you can't regard another as a person of dignity and worth until you feel the same way about yourself.

So I think we need to take very seriously the first thing the Bible says about us: we are worthful: we are loved of God and that gives us and every man an indellible dignity. There was an unforgetable picture publishes in the newspapers of a black man marching in a demonstration. The sign he carried said it all: "I am a man".

And yet, in tension with that we must take seriously the other word the Bible says about us, and I'm not sure we do, or that we really want to. The Philosophy of classical liberalism is very appealing: namely, that man's condition can be bettered by improving the environment: that given good schools, good houses, good communities, and good homes, all of mankind's historical problems will vanish. Now I would not want to be misinterpreted at this crucial point. My deep conviction is that we are called by our Lord himself to better the welfare of our brother man, and that we will be measured by the degree to which we do it. But I don't believe that better housing is salvation. I think we need to honestly assess our capacity for evil. I think we need to confront the truth about ourselves as men - in view of next year's defense budget, and a continuing sensless war. I think we need to look honestly at what happened in Bangladesh and Northern Ireland and New York City and be ready to say that we're all in this mess together: that we are all brothers - victums and perpetrators alike. I think we need to be honest with ourselves about our own small contribution to evil in the world, in terms of our own dishonesties and unkindnesses. I think we need to confess that none of us measures up: none of us becomes what God created us to be: all of us settle for less: all of us - in one form or another buy an image, a definition, Howard Hughes, Hugh Heffner, Joe Namath - or some other. All of us break the heart of our father God in a

hundred ways every day.

Who, in Paul's words, will deliver us? Paul had experienced the resolution of the tension in his own life, and so answered his own question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord". And thats the third thing the Bible says about us. We need help. We need God. We are not fully human - fully men - without him.

Every man who ever lived needs to be in relationship with the God who created him: a God whose perfection keeps our own inperfection in perspective: a God whose perfect love forces our hates and unlove out into the open--But he is also a Father God whose intimate love for us heals our wounds, forgives our sin and accepts us - just as he created us - crowned with glory and honor.

What is man? God provided a model. God gave one who was man as man was created to be. Jesus Christ is his name, and here we see what it is to be truly human. In him we sense how far we are from God's model. But in him, in his life and teaching and death we experience the best thing that can be said about us: we are loved and accepted by God.

What is Man? An enigma? Not really. A child of God, whose deepest need is simply to know that. AMEN

Father, keep us from those daily compromises that prevent us from being human. Help us to see ourselves, and each other, in the light of your love - expressed most clearly in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN